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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: PRESIDENT NAZARBAYEV SIGNS MADRID
LEGISLATION, REACTION MUTED THUS FAR

REF: (A) 08 ASTANA 2388
(B) 08 ASTANA 2256

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (U) In following through on Kazakhstan's Madrid commitments on democratic reform, President Nazarbayev signed into law new legislation on political parties and the media on February 6 and legislation on elections on February 9.

13. (SBU) The public reaction to the legislation's signing has been somewhat muted thus far, perhaps because most news outlets are still focused on the February 4 devaluation of Kazakhstan's currency. Most civil society activists have not publicly reacted to the signing. However, Tamara Kaleyeva, the head of the respected media watchdog NGO "Adil Soz," said that although she would have like to see the new media law go further, it is nevertheless "a step towards further democratization." Kazakhstan's opposition parties, several of whom previously called on Nazarbayev to veto the laws, have stayed unusually silent since he signed the legislation. The leaders of the Azat party were the only ones to make a statement, publicizing their criticism of the laws and announcing that the party will hold protest rallies on February 21.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: Even if the new laws do not go as far as we -- or some of Kazakhstan's opposition and civil society leaders -- would have liked, they represent a step forward on the long path toward democratization. We should recognize this, while continuing to press Kazakhstan for further progress, including Kazakhstan's continued cooperation with the OSCE and ODIHR in bringing its laws better in line with OSCE standards. The new legislation is also a victory for President Nazarbayev's more liberal advisors, including Foreign Minister Tazhin and State Secretary Saudabayev. Progress on the Madrid commitments was stalled during the first half of 2008, until Nazarbayev publicly commented on them for the first time in a June 29, 2008, address to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Astana -- a step which the liberals apparently persuaded him to take. After then, the bureaucracy stepped up to the plate, and the legislation began to move forward. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND